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DEPT FOR WHA/CEN (MACK)

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SUBJECT: CHAIRMAN OF DFC COMMISSION OF INQUIRY DIES IN CUBA

REF: A. Belize 973 B. Belize 678

¶1. On December 13, local media reported that David Price, Chairman of the Commission of Inquiry charged with investigating the financial dealings of the Development Finance Corporation (DFC), died in Cuba. Price, who suffered from diabetes, flew by air ambulance to Cuba on November 13 to seek treatment for complications from the disease. Merlene Bailey-Martinez, another DFC Commission member, told local news that the diabetes led to renal failure and heart problems, which ultimately caused his death.

¶2. The DFC public hearings have been delayed or postponed since September, when the Commission took a break for the month-long celebrations in honor of Belize's 25th anniversary of independence. Shortly thereafter, Price became ill and was in and out of local hospitals before traveling to Cuba for treatment. Bailey-Martinez and Commission member and judge Herbert Lord have been conducting sporadic in-camera sessions since then.

¶3. Although the Commission originally expected to complete its inquiries by the end of the year, the frequent delays and now Price's death have changed all that. Karim Berges, former president of the Association of Concerned Belizeans (a civic organization that encourages government transparency) and close follower of DFC developments, told poloff that Bailey-Martinez and Lord will move forward with the hearings, but do not expect to conclude until the end of January. Berges also said that although Price's death is a blow to the inquiry process, he does not believe it will adversely impact its results or how they are received by the public. Berges fully expects the Commission to conclude that corruption was rampant in DFC offices, and hopes that several high-ranking individuals will be prosecuted once the findings are publicized.

¶4. Comment. Because Commissioners Bailey-Martinez and Lord have continued to investigate privately the workings of the DFC, the death of Chairman David Price - while unfortunate - should not cause the hearings to conclude prematurely. However, Price was the "face" of these hearings (at least for the media) and it is unclear whether a Commission led by Bailey-Martinez and Lord will garner the same level of attention. A more pressing concern is what - if any - actions law enforcement and prosecutors will take as a result of the Commission's findings. End comment.